



# Wapato Portage

## Cultural Resources at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge

### *A Piece of History...*

After a wet winter at the Pacific Ocean, the members of the Corps of Discovery turned their boats back up the Columbia River toward home. On March 29, 1806, Clark wrote in his journal:

***“At 5 oclock reembarked and proceeded up on the NE. of an Island to an inlet about 1 mile above the village and encamped on a butifull grassy place, where the natives make a portage of their Canoes and Wappato roots to and from a large pond at a Short distance.”***

The “butifull grassy place” to which Clark refers is 45CL4, a nationally significant archaeological site on the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge known today as Wapato Portage. After visiting and describing the large Chinookan village they called Cathlapotle (also on the Refuge), the expedition camped for the night at this riverbank site. In his journal, Clark went on to describe in detail the process of gathering wapato, one of the major dietary staples along the lower Columbia River.

***“... in this pond the natives inform us they Collect great quantities of p[w]appato, which the womin collect by getting into the water, Sometimes to their necks holding a Small canoe and with their feet loosen the wappato or bulb of the root from the***

***bottom from the Fibers, and it imedeately rises to the top of the water, they Collect & throw them into the Canoe, those deep roots are the largest and best roots.”***

The pond described by Clark is Carty Lake, just east of the site, which still provides food for the thousands of migratory waterfowl that frequent the Refuge. Canoes filled with the bulb would be dragged over the narrow strip of land that separates the lake from Lake River and transported back down to Cathlapotle.

The site has a history that dates back much earlier than 1806. In fact, radiocarbon dating has determined that the site is at least 2300 years old. Stratified cultural deposits above the oldest dates and the presence of nineteenth century trade goods tells us the

Chinookan people used this site for over two thousand years.

Intact, stratified sites of this age are very rare in the active floodplain of the Columbia. Only the Merrybell site on Sauvie Island is as old, and more recent occupations there are not as well represented as at Wapato Portage. Preliminary studies suggest Wapato Portage may reveal much of the legacy of the Chinookans.

Archaeological excavations and historic research in the early 1980s revealed continuing activity at Wapato Portage during early Euro-American settlement. The site is located at a river crossing along the Fort Vancouver to Cowlitz Prairie Trail constructed by the Hudson’s Bay Company in the 1820s. It functioned as a landing for cargo being transported along the trail. This element in the



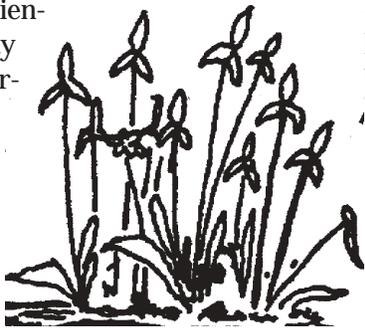
***Annual flood events and wakes from boats are eroding the bank and destroying valuable archaeological data.***

site's history was confirmed when test excavations recovered trade beads, bullets, bottle glass, ceramics, and numerous metal artifacts.

### *...Was Falling into the River*

Wapato Portage is on the floodplain of the Columbia River, which is prone to annual floods that inundate the cutbank along the western edge of the site. During these periods of high water, the increased current frequently eroded annual vegetation from the bank, exposing the site's sandy sediments. Waves from wind and particularly commercial and recreational boats attacked the exposed bank, causing large blocks of artifact-bearing soil to cave into the river. The waves then broke up these blocks, scattering artifacts along the beach. As the site is located near the Port of Ridgefield and a marina, boat traffic is heavy and the damage significant.

This site suffered significant impacts from floods in 1996 which exacerbated the continuing problem of commercial and recreational boat wakes on Lake River. Large cottonwood trees which protected the site were ripped out of the bank, taking much of the site's information with them. The steep cutbank along the site's western edge continues to erode rapidly, displacing large numbers of artifacts and destroying both the cultural and scientific integrity of this important site.



### *Stemming the Destructive Tide...*

With the help of partners dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of Washington, Wapato Portage was protected from further destruction. In 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recovered the cultural and scientific values of Wapato Portage and stabilized the riverbank to prevent further degradation.

### *...To Bring History Back to Life*

Preservation of Wapato Portage and other sites along the lower Columbia River are important to the cultural identity of the Chinookan People. The Chinookans nearly disappeared as a unique society in the 1830s due in large part to their homeland's location on the major trade route of the Columbia. Old World diseases traveling this corridor devastated the Chinookans, killing perhaps as much as 95 percent of the precontact population. As a result, the Chinookans are a dispersed people. The survivors of displacement and disease settled on the reservations of more fortunate tribes or became partially integrated into Euro-American society.

Today, the Chinookans are reclaiming their tribal identity. Tribal members are recapturing the art and the traditional skills of their ancestors. As part of these efforts, the Chinook Tribe, located at the mouth of the Columbia River, has actively supported and participated in archaeological excavations to retrieve information about

their culture. Wapato Portage represents an opportunity for members of the Chinookan language and culture group to trace their cultural identity far into the past.

With the approaching bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, public interest in the places they visited and their observations of people, wildlife and geography will take center stage. Ongoing research at Wapato Portage will provide a remarkable opportunity through the media, area schools and local historical and archaeological societies to disseminate this part of their journey.

Wapato Portage also provides opportunities to train archaeologists and geologists. Portland State University (PSU) has conducted archaeological research in the Portland Basin over the last thirty years, most recently at Cathlapotle where six years of field school and ongoing laboratory analysis are revealing fascinating information about the history and prehistory of the lower Columbia. Sedimentary geologists from PSU, the U.S. Geological Survey and other Northwest universities will have a rich canvas for exploring and explaining the complex evolution of the Columbia River floodplain. The well-preserved stratigraphy at the Wapato Portage site offers new opportunities for professors and students to bring both experience and an essential scientific framework to our understanding of the past.

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